

SPIRITUAL FRUIT

Joy

Galatians 5:22-25

Joy! According to Paul, the Spirit of God produces joy within us. Joy is a part of our spiritual nature. It is a spiritual virtue that is available to us—if we want it!

Last week we began our series “Spiritual Fruit” by examining love, the virtue that heads Paul’s spiritual fruit list. It has been said that when love is present, joy cannot be far behind! I would expand this to say that when love is present the rest of the virtues on the fruit list can not be far behind. Once we embrace and live love as modeled by Jesus and defined by Paul in I Corinthians 13 then the other virtues seem to fall into place. (Read I Corinthians 13:4-8a)

If I love others as Jesus loves me, which is how he has said I should love,¹ then I will love others sacrificially and unconditionally. I will go out of my way for others. I will forgive and hold no grudges. And, I will not try to use any if, ands or buts in order to justify my unloving actions!

I must confess that today’s message has been one of the most difficult that I have ever prepared. I wrote and rewrote. And I kept getting stuck. And finally I sat back and asked myself, “Why? Why is this message so tough to prepare? Do I not know anything about joy? Am I trying to talk about something that is foreign to me?” Well, not exactly! I think the answer lies in love. And also, in our common misunderstanding as to what joy is. Since I agree that when love is present then joy cannot be far behind a part of my confession to you is, I am still working on love. There are times that I would rather turn and walk away than to demonstrate love. There are times that I want people to prove to me their worthiness before I will love them. This is not easy to say—but friends it is the truth. And it is the truth that can set one free; for until I recognize and acknowledge my failings in love, I cannot grow in love.

So this brings us to joy! Friends, our experience of joy will be in direct proportion to how we love. So the more that I love others as Christ loves me then the more I will experience joy. And by joy I am referring to something far more meaningful and significant than happiness. We often confuse happiness with joy. We strive for happiness! And this is probably the problem. Instead of striving for, working for, happiness we need to be tapping into our spiritual nature and experiencing the joy that is available to us as a gift from God. That is right. Joy is a gift from God. The Greek words for joy and grace come from the same root word. Grace is something that is given freely. We do not work for grace, God’s love, it is given freely. And so it is with joy. God gives joy! So why then do we keep working for happiness?

This past Wednesday in the *Times-Union* there was an article titled “*Why is happiness so remote?*” The subtitle was, “*We have a lot, but we are not satisfied...*” The article quotes Robert Putnam, a Harvard government professor. He says, “*It’s amazing what little effect material possessions have on happiness. Money can buy you happiness but not very much...but connections with family and friends are very powerful.*”

Happiness, my friends, is circumstantial. I am happy when something good occurs in my life. I am happy when I receive an unexpected financial reward. I am happy when I have a date. Joy is not circumstantial. Joy, as a spiritual virtue, is present even when my circumstances do not produce happiness. I can have joy even when good things are not happening in my life. One has to chase after happiness whereas with joy one taps into their spiritual nature—and there joy is. Joy comes from within; happiness comes from without. Joy is based on relationship with God not on circumstances.

Philo, an ancient Jewish philosopher, wrote that the opposite of joy is fear; not sadness but fear. When we grasp what Philo is saying it becomes one of those “aha” kind of moments. Why do we not love like Jesus—unconditionally and sacrificially? Because we are afraid to! We are afraid that someone might take advantage of us. We are afraid that we might get cheated in the process. We are afraid that we might get hurt by being so vulnerable. Why is it we seek after circumstantial happiness instead of tapping into our spiritual nature and experiencing the joy that God has to give us? Because we are afraid to. We are afraid of depending upon God. We are afraid of what it might cost us—emotionally and financially. We are afraid of going without so instead we gather around us all of the things that temporarily make us happy while all along joy waits within—it is a part of our spiritual nature.

Paul, the man we often love to hate, writes it this way, “...*I have learned to be content with whatever state I am in...*”² Joy is available to us in whatever state we are in. I experienced this gift of contentment, of joy, at one of the lowest points in my life. I was still hiding in the closet due to fear and I was sitting in jail following my last cruising arrest. I was thinking that my life was over. And I was scared to death. In the midst of my unhappiness—because circumstances did not call for happiness—I suddenly had a sense of contentment come over me. It was without question the spirit of God for my contentment came from within. If I was in jail so was God. God did not abandon me at the door—my spiritual resource was not cut off. I became more aware of my contentment, my joy, as I realized the fight of fear was over. I decided in those moments to be myself—that I would come out. I was freed from religious law and now I could begin to love myself as I had never done before which also meant I could love others as never before. Trusting in God at a very unhappy time in my life helped me to experience joy for the very first time.

A Native American elder was teaching his grandchildren about life, saying to them, “*A fight is going on inside me. It is between two wolves. One wolf is evil—he is fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, anxiety, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, competition and superiority. The other wolf is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, faith and laughter.*”

He then tells his grandchildren that the same fight is going on inside of them and also inside of every person. The children think about this for a moment and then one of them asks his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

*The old man then replies, “The one that you feed.”*³

¹ John 13:34b

² Philippians 4:11b

³ Donald O'Dell, *How the Bible became the Bible*, page 1.